

“Impartial”
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Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Psalm 145:1-9; Matthew 5:43-48

They were tired and frustrated and frightened and confused, and who can blame them? We don’t know how many miles they’d travelled in the hot, rough, barren wilderness of the Sinai, nor did they know how much longer they might wander on the quest to the Promised Land, or for that matter, whether they would ever get there. But it seems enough time had passed for the wondrous liberation from bondage in Egypt to fade a little from their memories, though the lush green fields along the Nile River remained vivid in their minds, and the cruel oppression of Pharaoh didn’t seem so bad anymore, or perhaps it had simply been overcome by their present suffering and uncertainty.

So while Moses was on the mountain receiving God’s commandments, the Israelites below resorted to expediency. They sought out a new hope in something more tangible, more accessible than this God of roiling cloud and fire and thunder. They made a golden calf to worship, and God was understandably furious, ready to wipe them all out for their terrible betrayal of the covenant: for their ingratitude to a liberating God who had already done so much; for the incredible distrust in a God who had proven faithful time and again.

Yet God relented from His wrath, in part thanks to Moses’ intervention, but Moses felt angry, too, and when he got to the base of the mountain and saw with his own eyes what the people had done, he smashed the tablets of the Ten Commandments to the ground. Later, he climbed the mountain once more to get a replacement set, staying forty days and forty nights, and when Moses returned to the people this time, he told them how it was going to be, and we heard a small snippet of what he said from the Book of Deuteronomy several minutes ago.

Only one God, “mighty and awesome,” deserves worship.” Now none of that is new, but then we hear the words, “who is not partial,” and that’s strange, because in the story so far, it’s been quite clear that God is most definitely partial. He chose a specific people to share in His promise and to show forth His glory in the world. So what does this claim of impartiality mean?

Well, Moses elaborated. God’s justice advocates for the orphan and the widow, for the most vulnerable in society, for those least likely to make it, unless they receive support from the people around them. This actually sounds more like partiality, but the key phrase is “who . . . takes no bribe.” In other words, God is incorruptible, unlike those who take advantage of the weak and the vulnerable, or disregard them as worthless because they serve no function. Such people tend to be partial to powerful people, like Pharaoh, but God shows no such partiality. Instead, our powerful God, who confronted and mocked and destroyed the strength of Pharaoh, cares for the weak and commands that those who follow Him to do the same. But that’s not all.

God also “loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing,” requiring Israel – and by extension us – to do the same, because Israel were themselves strangers in Egypt, exploited, treated harshly and without respect, their humanity diminished simply because they were different, because Pharaoh feared that their burgeoning population would alter the balance of power, upset the *status quo*, and change the advantage that the few had over the many. God expected the people of Israel to feel kinship and show empathy to those outside their ethnic tribe, a radical command that to them probably felt like a threat to their sense of identity and integrity as a nation.

Now none of this meant that God no longer saw Israel as special, far from it. Instead, God wanted them to be special by being different in a different way. Being different in terms of tribe, ethnicity, or religion, well, everybody defined themselves around those criteria, and we still

do. But God chose Israel to be distinct by showing a higher quality of kindness and mercy, to live out a more expansive and inclusive vision that reveals and reflects who God is. God chose Israel to take risks and make sacrifices so that all people may know, as the Psalmist wrote, that “The Lord is loving to everyone, and his compassion is over all his works.” [Psalm 145:9]

Jesus took this to the extreme when, in his Sermon on the Mount, he commanded his followers to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” everybody’s favorite verse from the Bible. Jesus justified his claim on the basis of God’s impartiality, “for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” Jesus also pointed out that to be different, to be special in a godly way, means reaching for a higher standard. It’s normal to love the people you like, to love people like you, who share the same views and preferences, to love people who love you back, but following Jesus means not being normal.

Of course, it’s perplexing, the idea that you could love an enemy, because if you do, then how could that person still be your enemy? But that’s exactly what Jesus is getting at. At some point, somebody’s got to take the initiative and love, or the sinful cycle of hate just keeps on turning. Who better than a faithful follower of Jesus to stop the cycle of destruction? The love of Jesus, alive in the faithful, conquered death. Surely, it can heal enmity and strife.

But it seems impractical if not impossible. Exactly how, for instance, are we supposed to love people who slaughter the innocent with glee? I lack the wisdom to answer that question, because my fury toward them is great and my faith correspondingly weak. But grace laughs at the limits of practicality, and with God, nothing is impossible. Loving our enemies, especially the worst of them, is a matter that requires persistent prayer, and the hope that someday God will

bring us closer to the fullness of His love, to “Be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect,” to quote Jesus.

In the meantime, we the people chosen by Jesus can be different. We can be humbly special by honoring and adopting God’s impartiality in a highly fragmented world where partiality has become very popular, a source of pride for many. We see this displayed flagrantly in the fierce partisan divide that has poisoned the political sphere of our country, inhibiting the pursuit of the common good. It’s almost as if we no longer aspire after noble purposes, but strive instead to win the crown of who can hate the most. It must be very disappointing for God, to see our self-proclaimed Christian nation in such a plight, and one wonders how our founders might feel if they could be alive today.

George Washington prophetically warned us of the dangers of partisanship in his Farewell Address. “However political parties may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion.” The wisdom of this truest of patriots is worthy of reflection this week, but even as Washington spoke those words, it was already too late.

Yet it is never too late for people of faith to be different and special in the way of Jesus by transcending cult, clan, and ideology, and it begins by prioritizing the needs of the weak, of the most vulnerable in society, like the widow and the orphan, those least likely to make it, unless they receive support from the people around them. It begins with loving the stranger, no matter how strange they might be. It begins by trying to love our enemies, because even when

we fall short, we will have enkindled an ember of forgiveness that will serve as a powerful witness to our God, “mighty and awesome.”

Now that sounds lovely, but we don't think we can change the world, and we're right. It seems so hopeless, but we're wrong. God can change the world, if we let Him, if we invite Him into our hearts and into our midst and allow him to work through us, and that gives us hope that keeps us going on our journey through the wilderness, eyes looking sharp to the horizon for the Promised Land.

We often pray, and sometimes seem to demand, that God bless America, and this is a good thing to do, but there needs to be reciprocity in every relationship, or they fall apart. So this week, as we celebrate our Independence as a nation, we need to reflect on what it means to be a good Christian citizen of our great nation, so that America may bless God. Amen.